

Review of *Transgender Marxism* edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (Pluto Press)

by E Lev Feinman | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT *Transgender Marxism* is a provocative and groundbreaking union of trans studies and Marxist theory. Exploring trans lives and movements, the authors delve into the experience of trans survival and movement solidarity under capitalism. They explore the pressures, oppression, and state persecution faced by trans people living in capitalist societies, and their tenuous positions in the workplace and the home. The authors give a powerful response to right-wing scaremongering against "gender ideology." Reflecting on the relations between gender and labor, these essays reveal the structure of antagonisms faced by gender non-conforming people within society. Looking at the history of trans movements, Marxist interventions into developmental theory, psychoanalysis, and workplace ethnography, the authors conclude that in order to achieve trans liberation, capitalism must be abolished.

KEYWORDS capitalism, Marxism, solidarity, class, trans studies, communism

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The number of trans and gender non-conforming people who are murdered has increased every year since the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) began tracking these incidents in 2013, with 2021 being the deadliest recorded year yet—at least 57 precious trans lives were lost¹—and at least 21 trans lives have been lost in 2022 to fatal shootings or violence—the majority of which are Black and Latinx trans women². Because these deaths are often unreported or misreported, it is likely that there are others not counted in this data. While this is an important data point, we are doing a disservice to trans lives, to social movements, and to labor organizing by not also measuring trans lives lost to austerity capitalism. The number of trans lives lost to hostile and exploitative living and working conditions, inadequate access to free or affordable housing and healthcare, and antitrans discrimination which prevents access to better jobs, safe housing, and gender-affirming, life-saving healthcare is unknown. In *Transgender Marxism*, an anthology edited by Jules

Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, contributor Nat Raha writes that "social disinvestment and austerity measures have become defining features of the daily lives of many LGBTQ people," (92) especially those who are trans, disabled, migrants, and people of color. What do we lose when we lose count of trans lives lost to lethal capitalism?

With stakes this high, *Transgender Marxism* offers a radical union of trans studies and Marxist theory to reflect on the relations between gender and labor, thus making visible the structures of antagonisms precluding trans survival under capitalism. This compelling collection of essays offers a critical exploration of the potential of Marxist interventions to disrupt the pressures, oppression, and state persecution disrupting trans lives.

Transgender Marxism features fourteen essays offering a global range of perspectives written by trans academics and university students, psychoanalysts, movement organizers, artists, and practitioners of psychoanalysis, plus an introduction by the editors and an afterword by Jordy Rosenberg.

While *Transgender Marxism* is thought to be the first full-length publication of its kind, the anthology suggests that transgender Marxism (as an active framework for theorization) builds on a historically and culturally rich tradition of theorizing gender transition, gender non-conformity, and trans struggles alongside Marxist frameworks. Perhaps a future direction to further develop the framework would involve a geneological project charting Transgender Marxist theory in relation to, for example, Wilhelm Reich's "Sex-Pol" essays (written between 1929 and 1934), the poetic contributions of John Weiner (written between the 1960s and 90s), the history of separatist communes, such as the lesbian separatist commune known as the Furies Collective (active between 1971 and 1973), or the organizers behind radical publications such as "The Red Butterfly" (a short series published in 1970), "Fag Rag" (published by the Fag Rag Collective between 1971 and the early 1980s), and the "Gay Left" (published by the Gay Left Collective between 1975 and 1980).

Having effectively contextualized a relationship between Marxism and the struggles faced by trans people in the introduction written by Gleeson and O'Rourke, Chapter 1—"Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context" by Noah Zazanis—introduces agency as a central aspect of gender socialization, thereby making space for the unique particularities of experiences of trans socialization and trans social reproduction. With agency embedded in processes of socialization, social reproduction theory (SRT) becomes open to theories and experiences of trans social reproduction. SRT is a key feminist intervention into Marxism, but one which is premised on a theory of forced gendered socialization, thus making SRT transantagonistic and trans-exclusionary.

In chapter 2, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," Michelle O'Brien highlights trans peoples' experiences of job precarity as a means for understanding the various forms of gender discipline and regulation experienced by all working-class people in their jobs.

Rosa Lee's Chapter 3, "Judith Butler's Scientific Revolution: Foundations for a Transsexual Marxism," frames Judith Butler's paradigm-shifting theory of gender performativity as grounds to call for "transsexual Marxism"—rather than a "transgender Marxism"—thereby putting forth a Marxist analytic that is "refracted through the analysis of gender and sex transition" (62).

In Chapter 4, Jules Joanne Gleeson asks and answers the question, "How do Gender Transitions Happen?" and also why gender transitions happen, exploring these questions from an individual and community perspective.

Chapter 5, "A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction" by Nat Raha, offers the "physical and emotional housework of surviving as lesbian women" (85) and the organizing work of the Wages Due Lesbians movement as a place to theorize social reproduction of LGBTQ+ lives.

Launching off of Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power in Brazil, Virginia Guitzel argues in "Notes on Brazil," Chapter 6, that there exists historical parallels between LGBTQ+ movements for sexual liberation and the labor movement.

Kate Doyle Griffiths' Chapter 7, "Queer Workerism Against Work: Strategising Transgender Labourers, Social Reproduction & Class Formation," argues for the strategic necessity of organizing queer and trans workers—whose experiences can be seen as existing at the "chokepoints of social reproduction" (138)—toward broader movements for universalist politics.

In Chapter 8, "The Bridge Between Gender and Organising," Farah Thompson offers reflections on the limitations of self-love and promises of social organizing, class consciousness, and caring communities as protecting the lives of Black trans women.

In chapter 9, "Encounters in Lancaster," JN Hoad uses the *swerve*, a theory from the classical Greek philosopher Epicurus, to draw a connection between atomic encounters and the matrix of social relations. This chapter situates the development of a trans expertise in developing an ethic of encounters, a survival skill which enables trans people to carefully navigate "social worlds of alienation, enforced heterosexuality, and class division" (166).

Zoe Belinski works with Jasbir Puar's writing on *debility* in Chapter 10. "Transgender and Disabled Bodies: Between Pain and the Imaginary" looks at disability as a relation of material force which reduces certain bodies—such as disabled, trans, and trans disabled bodies—to slow death.

Chapter 11, "A Dialogue on Deleuze and Gender Difference," presents a Deleuzian articulation of transness which "respects both singularity and multiplicity," (200). This contribution is from The Conspiratorial Association for the Advancement of Cultural Degeneracy (CAACD), described as a "collective name for dialogue encouraging lines of flight, and shaking of the habitual" (297).

Nathaniel Dickinson theorizes a liberatory trans epistemology in Chapter 12—"Seizing the Means: Towards a Trans Epistemology"—through conceiving of trans social reproductive labor as productive steps to be taken toward realizing a radically reimagined relationship to oneself and to others.

The provocatively titled chapter 13, "'Why Are We Like This?': The Primacy of Transsexuality" offers Xandra Metcalfe's response to the question of why trans people are trans, Chapter 13 adopts a *transpositive* viewpoint to flip this question on its head and ask why are cis people cis.

In chapter 14, "Cosmos Against Nature in the Class Struggle of Proletarian Trans Women," Anja Heisler Weiser Flower sends us to the cosmos and the stars to theorize the trans proletarian struggle from a cosmic-ecological view to overcome the "metabolic rift between human activity and non-human ecology" (254).

In the afterword, "One Utopia, One Dystopia," Jordy Rosenberg takes up "metabolic rift" to argue there exists "a path into Marx that proceeds through transness," (259) and to ground the call for transgender Marxism in the specificity of our historical moment. Citing the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, nationwide uprisings against police violence and the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade, the uptake in union strikes and victories worldwide, and the relentless legislative attacks on trans children, Rosenberg writes, "The intimacy of deindustrialisation, incarceration, and the recommodified care work sector has come to an extreme crisis in 2020–2021" (263).

Arguing the "oppression of trans people remains unmistakably capitalist" (16), *Transgender Marxism* stands in opposition to the obscuring how trans people "survive in the face of capitalism (or indeed, other modes of production)" (10). Two years into the global pandemic, this extreme crisis rages on, and the numbers of trans lives lost to fatal police and civilian violence continue to increase alongside the unknown number of trans lives lost to policies of lethal capitalism. In 2020, my partner, a queer Black Latino trans man, was

one of the many unknowns. Because state records claim he died of cancer, his life is not counted as one lost due to fatal violence against trans people, yet it is undoubtedly the violent and fatal ambivalence of state capitalism toward trans lives which led to his premature death. His trans experience was one we know all too well, and the one taken up in *Transgender Marxism*: experiences of job discrimination and consequent periods of under- or unemployment, and inaccessible healthcare that made preventative care and treatment largely unavailable to him. No anthology illuminates this truth quite like the rich collection found in *Transgender Marxism*. I recommend *Transgender Marxism* as a must-read for those interested in Marxist theory; trans studies; labor studies; trans liberation; gender and work relations; arguments for abolishing capitalism, property, and the family; and social movements and organizing—especially if interested in solidarity-building across identities within movement-organizing.

Notes

1. "Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021," *HRC Foundation*, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021> < <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021>> . ↩
 2. "Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2022," *HRC Foundation*, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2022> < <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2022>> . ↩
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